

North Korea's Military Strategy

HOMER T. HODGE

© 2003 Homer T. Hodge

Simply put, military strategies derive from national strategies intended to achieve goals and conditions that satisfy national interests. Military strategies reflect capabilities vis-à-vis potential opponents, resource constraints, and desired end states. North Korea is no different; its military strategy is a reflection of Pyongyang's national goals. Military strategies also reflect what one might call "cultural rules of engagement"; i.e., they are based on the socially constructed views unique to the nation.¹

Pyongyang's Foremost National Goal

Historically, Pyongyang's foremost goal has been the reunification of the Korean Peninsula on North Korean terms. The regime's constitution describes reunification as "the supreme national task,"² and it remains a consistently pervasive theme in North Korean media. However, despite what the North Koreans have continued to tell us for the past five decades, outside observers and specialists differ greatly over exactly what North Korea's goals really are.

Since at least the mid-1990s, there has been a widespread view among Korea observers that, because of severe economic decline, food shortages, and related problems, regime survival has replaced reunification as Pyongyang's most pressing objective.³ Further, these observers argue, despite its rhetoric, North Korea realizes that reunification through conquest of South Korea is no longer possible.⁴ There are also some who argue that the North Korean leadership has recognized the need to initiate substantial change in order to survive in the international community and is embarking on economic reform, reconciliation with South Korea, and reduction of military tensions. In addition to the goals of regime survival, reform, and reconciliation, there is another explanatory view of North Korea's foremost national goal that has been held by a minority of observers for several decades (and has been a consistent theme of North Korean

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 2003		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2003 to 00-00-2003	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE North Korea's Military Strategy				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) US Army War College,ATTN: Parameters,47 Ashburn Drive,Carlisle,PA,17013				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 14	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

media)—defense against foreign invasion by “imperialist aggressors and their lackey running dogs.”⁵ Adherents of this view believe that the North Korean leadership genuinely fears an attack by the United States and South Korea and maintains a strong military purely for defense.⁶ President Bush’s reference to the “axis of evil” in his January 2002 State of the Union address, announcement of plans to adopt a “pre-emptive” military strategy, and increasing numbers of statements by Administration officials about US intentions to employ military force to remove Iraq’s Saddam Hussein from power have added support to the “defense” explanation. Some have also argued that enhancement of the military by Kim Jong Il⁷ serves primarily to strengthen his domestic political power base. While there is an obvious element of truth in this proposition, it is an oversimplification that distorts the true role of military strength in the regime.

Others accept North Korea’s word that reunification remains the primary goal and argue that Pyongyang’s long-term strategy to dominate the peninsula by any means has not changed. They cite North Korea’s continued focus of scarce resources to the military,⁸ development of longer-range ballistic missiles, and the recent revelation by Pyongyang that it seeks a nuclear weapons capability⁹ as indications that reunification remains the foremost goal.

The preponderance of evidence clearly supports the conclusion that reunification under the leadership of Kim Jong Il, by whatever means, remains “the supreme national task.” North Korean media rhetoric continues to extol reunification under Kim. A parallel but closely related theme is that of completing the socialist revolution. When North Korean leaders speak of achieving “socialist revolution in our country,” they mean unification of the entire peninsula on their terms.¹⁰ The Kim regime in North Korea considers the entire peninsula as constituting its sovereign territory. It does not recognize South Korea as being a separate nation, nor the government of South Korea as legitimate. Therefore, when North Korea refers to “our country” or the “fatherland,” they mean the entire Korean peninsula. When read in the original Korean, the meaning of these terms becomes much clearer. The North Korean leaders view the southern half of their country as occupied by “US imperialists” and the government of South Korea as “puppets serving their imperialist masters.” “Defense” does not refer to defending North Korea, but to defending all of Korea. Accordingly, “defense of the fatherland” means (1) reclaiming that portion of Korea—i.e., South Korea—that

Homer T. Hodge is the Senior Intelligence Officer for Asia at the US Army National Ground Intelligence Center (NGIC) in Charlottesville, Virginia. He is a retired Army officer and former Northeast Asia Foreign Area Officer with active service in Korea and Japan. His civilian service includes assignments with the National Security Agency in the United States and Korea; the 501st Military Intelligence Brigade in Korea; and the Office of Special Advisor to CINCUNC/CFC/USFK. Mr. Hodge has served in his current position with NGIC (and its predecessor, the US Army Intelligence and Threat Analysis Center) since 1990, and has written numerous intelligence studies on North Korea’s military forces.

“Reunification of the peninsula remains the foremost goal that drives North Korea’s national strategy.”

is currently occupied and controlled by the “imperialists,” and (2) defending against further encroachment by “US imperialists.” While they certainly see that the possibility of a popular armed revolution in South Korea, particularly one sympathetic to Pyongyang, is extremely remote,¹¹ reunification through force of arms appears to remain possible to the North Korean leadership.¹²

Without question, survival is a basic goal of incumbent regimes of all nation-states; North Korea is no exception. However, in the long term, reunification is essential to regime survival. In the near- to mid-term, North Korea may be able to “muddle through” economically, based on donations from the outside, primarily from the United States and South Korea. However, pursuit of such a course can only lead to dependency and loss of control.¹³ Such dependency is inconsistent with the ideological tenet of *Juche* (self-reliance).¹⁴ The alternative to control of the entire peninsula is increasing dependence on South Korea, leading to complete economic absorption by Seoul and a breakdown of isolation and information control. The result would be the awakening of the North Korean populace to the true economic and social conditions of daily life in South Korea and, ultimately, the demise of the Kim regime.¹⁵ Clearly, regime survival, national defense, and a self-sufficient economy are logical goals; however, reunification of the peninsula remains the foremost goal that drives North Korea’s national strategy.¹⁶

In the North, the fear of conquest and defeat through economic absorption by South Korea undoubtedly has outweighed any fear of attack. North Korean leaders must know that time is on Seoul’s side; if the South Koreans bide their time, the cost of slowly but steadily making inroads into North Korea through economic means is obviously far smaller than the price in terms of blood and treasure required to conquer the North militarily and then rebuild. South Korea enjoys an increasing and irreversible economic lead over North Korea.¹⁷

A stronger case, based on recent events and statements of US officials, could be made to support the argument that North Korean leaders increasingly fear a US-led attack. The danger here is that as the North Korean leadership sees US actions in the war on terror, they may conclude that the United States intends to launch an attack to remove Kim Jong Il from power and decide to execute a preemptive surprise attack on South Korea. US initiation of military action against Iraq could prove to be the catalyst for a North Korean decision to go to war. While such an attack would be a gamble, the North Korean leadership could

judge that the US focus on and concentration of military power in operations against Iraq would strengthen North Korea's chances of success.

North Korea's surprising admission to US Assistant Secretary of State James A. Kelly during talks in Pyongyang on 16 October 2002 that it has a secret ongoing nuclear weapons development program was probably prompted by increasing North Korean concerns about possible US military action.

Historical Background

Knowledge of the 20th-century history of Korea is essential to understanding North Korean national interests and goals. Until the end of World War II in 1945, Korea had remained a single, ethnically and culturally homogenous country for over a thousand years. Initially divided on a temporary basis by the United States and Soviet Union along the 38th parallel to facilitate the surrender and demobilization of Japanese forces stationed in Korea, this division quickly became permanent as US-Soviet relations cooled. By 1948, two governments, each claiming sovereignty over the entire peninsula, had been established: the Soviet-supported communist Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the north, and the US-backed Republic of Korea in the south.¹⁸ The national policies of both Koreas have been shaped by the underlying aim of eventual reunification.

The all-encompassing impact on North Korea of the character, personality, life experiences, and thinking of its founder and first leader, Kim Il Sung, is probably unique among modern nations. The past and current history, nature, and direction of the country cannot be understood apart from Kim Il Sung; eight years after his death, his influence remains dominant.¹⁹ Kim's perspective on the world and his view of the purpose of political power and the state were defined by his early education in Chinese schools and ideological training by Chinese Communists, his experience as a guerrilla fighter with the Chinese Communists against the Japanese in Manchuria, and his military training and further political education in the Soviet Union during World War II. The wartime Soviet state became the model on which the North Korean regime was created by Kim Il Sung.²⁰

As a key element of his ideological models (Stalin, Mao), "militarism" had a defining impact on Kim's thinking in his early formative years. The experience of the Korean War further strengthened this view. Kim, reflecting Maoist strategic thought, saw contradictory elements as driving history. Conflict did not require a solution; it *was* the solution to political problems. Hence, politics and international relations were processes by which contradictions were resolved through conflict, and the nature of that conflict was zero-sum. Accordingly, to Kim, the purpose of the state, like the anti-Japanese guerrilla unit, was to wage war effectively. In his view, economic activity produced the means to wage war, education produced soldiers to wage war, and ideology convinced the people of the sociological and historical inevitability of war.²¹ For Kim, war in the near-term meant reunifying the Korean peninsula on Pyongyang's terms and, in the long-term, continuing the global struggle against US imperialism.

From this thinking and Kim's early experiences evolved a unique North Korean nationalism that was not so much inspired by Korean history or past cultural achievements as by the Spartan outlook of the anti-Japanese guerrillas. This nationalism focused on imagined past wrongs and promises of retribution for "national leaders" (i.e., South Korean officials) and their foreign backers (i.e., the United States). The nationalism of Kim Il Sung capitalized on historic xenophobia, stressing the "purity" of all things Korean against the "contamination" of foreign ideas, and inculcating the population with a sense of fear and animosity toward the outside world. Most important, this nationalism emphasized "that the guerrilla ethos was not only supreme, but also the only legitimate basis on which to reconstitute a reunified Korea."²²

Militarism has remained an essential aspect of the character of the North Korean state since its founding in 1948; it constitutes a key element of the strategic culture of the regime. Accordingly, the maintenance of a powerful, offensive military force has always been and remains fundamental to the regime. This perspective was inculcated into the thinking of Kim's son and heir apparent, Kim Jong Il, throughout his life and is reflected in the younger Kim's policies, writings, and speeches. This militarism was the primary instrument to which he turned in order to deal with North Korea's severe economic crisis of the 1990s. Kim adopted the "military-first political method" as the means to survive and overcome this crisis. Accordingly, "military-first politics"²³ is the key element in the current theme of creating a "strong and prosperous nation" that is capable of realizing completion of the "socialist revolution"—i.e., reunification. "Military-first politics" is more than the employment of military terminology to describe organization, discipline, and perseverance in accomplishment of public tasks; it emphasizes the need for a strong military even at the sacrifice of daily public needs. The abolition of the post of state President and simultaneous elevation of the position of Chairman, National Defense Commission, to the "highest post of state" in 1998 further underscores Kim's ideological commitment to militarism as the fundamental basis for regime survival. North Korea's military strategy, as a component of national strategy, reflects this commitment.

Pyongyang's Military Strategy

North Korea's military strategy is offensive and is designed to provide a military option to achieve reunification by force employing surprise, overwhelming firepower, and speed. It is shaped by the regime's militarist ideology and the strong influence of Soviet and Russian military thinking with historical roots in the Korean nationalist resistance against Japanese colonialism, the Korean experience in the Chinese Civil War, and international events of the early Cold War years as interpreted by the late Kim Il Sung. Continued emphasis on maintaining this strategy, despite severe economic decline, suggests that Pyongyang continues to perceive an offensive military strategy as a viable option for ensuring regime survival and realizing reunification on North Korean terms.

***“US initiation of military action against Iraq
could prove to be the catalyst for a
North Korean decision to go to war.”***

The offensive character of Pyongyang’s military strategy is demonstrated by the organization and deployment of its forces. The primary instrument of this strategy is North Korea’s armed forces, known collectively as the Korean People’s Army (KPA).

The KPA of 2003 is an imposing and formidable force of 1.17 million active personnel with a reserve force of over 5 million, making it the fifth largest military force in the world.²⁴ The ground forces are organized into eight infantry corps, four mechanized corps, an armor corps, and two artillery corps. The KPA air force consists of 92,000 personnel, and is equipped with some 730 mostly older combat aircraft and 300 helicopters. The 46,000-man KPA navy is primarily a coastal force.²⁵ Additionally, the KPA maintains the largest special operations force (SOF) in the world, consisting of approximately 100,000 highly trained, totally dedicated soldiers.²⁶ A long history of bloody incursions into South Korea underscores the offensive mission of this force.

The overwhelming majority of active ground forces is deployed in three echelons—a forward operational echelon of four infantry corps; supported by a second operational echelon of two mechanized corps, the armor corps, and an artillery corps; and a strategic reserve of the two remaining mechanized corps and the other artillery corps. These forces are garrisoned along major north-south lines of communication that provide rapid, easy access to avenues of approach into South Korea. The KPA has positioned massive numbers of artillery pieces, especially its longer-range systems, close to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that separates the two Koreas.²⁷

Soviet concepts of deep operations required the employment of air forces capable of achieving air superiority and air-deliverable ground forces; lacking the resources to produce or deploy such forces, the KPA compensated by greatly increasing deployment of conventional cannon and rocket artillery and tactical and strategic SOF.

Key elements of Pyongyang’s military strategy include the employment of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear (as recently revealed by Pyongyang), and missile systems including short- and medium-range and probably intercontinental missiles. The commander of US forces in Korea assesses that North Korea has large chemical weapon stockpiles, is self-sufficient in the production of chemical agents, and may have produced enough plutonium for at

least two nuclear weapons.²⁸ North Korea has now demonstrated the capability to strike targets throughout the entire territory of the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan, as well as large portions of China and Russia. In an attack on South Korea, Pyongyang could use its missiles in an attempt to isolate the peninsula from strategic reinforcement and intimidate or punish Japan. North Korea's inventory of ballistic missiles includes over 500 SCUD short-range ballistic missiles that can hit any target in South Korea and medium-range No Dong missiles capable of reaching Japan and the US bases there. While they have not flight-tested long-range missiles—at least, in North Korea—they have continued research, development, and rocket engine testing.²⁹

Although this is an offensive strategy, there are defensive aspects to it. An army must protect its flanks whether attacking or defending. This principle takes on added importance for a peninsular state such as Korea. Both geography and history have taught the North Koreans the vital necessity of protecting their coasts; during the Korean War, United Nations forces conducted two major amphibious operations in Korea, one on each coast.³⁰ The KPA continues to improve coastal defenses, especially in the forward area. They have established or strengthened air defense positions around airfields, near major ports, and along the primary highway between Pyongyang and the DMZ. Additionally, there is a corps-size capital defense command responsible for the defense of Pyongyang.³¹ However, KPA force deployment lacks defensive depth at the operational level of war. The North Koreans have not constructed defensive belts across the peninsula similar to Forward Edge of the Battle Area (FEBA) Alfa, Bravo, and Charlie in South Korea.³² While there are local defensive positions along lines of communication and key intersections manned by local militia and reserve units, they have not established an operational-level network of defensive strong points interlocked with obstacles and planned defensive fires. The forward-deployed artillery is sufficiently close to the DMZ that, in a defensive role, it would be vulnerable to surprise and early destruction by attack from South Korea.³³

Taken together, these facts strengthen the judgment that Pyongyang's military strategy is not defensive but offensive. A strong argument can probably also be made that North Korean military strategy would remain offensive even if defense against a feared attack replaced reunification as the foremost goal of the regime. North Korea's "militarist" culture advocates offense as the most effective means of defense.³⁴

Evolution of the Korean People's Army

KPA military doctrine—or, to use the North Korean (and Russian) term, military art—has followed the former Soviet (and current Russian) model very closely throughout its evolution.³⁵ The KPA, although claiming lineage to the anti-Japanese guerrilla force of pre-World War II days, was established on 8 February 1948, under Soviet military tutelage, as the primary instrument for carrying out Pyongyang's military strategy of reunifying the peninsula. Although efforts to

liberate the southern half of Korea through armed insurgency and covert action began earlier, planning, organization, and training for military reunification was the primary mission of the KPA from 1949 on. Veterans of the 1930s anti-Japanese guerrilla operations and Koreans who had served with Chinese Communist military formations against both the Japanese and later the Chinese Nationalists constituted the core cadre of the new KPA; however, the organization, training, doctrine, and military art closely mirrored the Soviet military thinking and practice of the period. The Soviets provided weapons and equipment as well as training to the new force. Key KPA officers, including Kim Il Sung, had received training and military experience in the Soviet Union during World War II. Additionally, a cadre of Soviet army advisors assisted in training and in KPA tactical and operational-level planning.³⁶

On 25 June 1950, the KPA launched a military campaign to reunify Korea by force. However, despite impressive initial successes, the intervention of United Nations (UN) forces, led by the United States, reversed the situation. By October, UN forces had crossed the 38th parallel dividing the two countries and were rapidly overrunning North Korea as they pursued the remnants of a defeated and fleeing KPA. The intervention of 260,000 Chinese forces in November halted and turned back the UN advance. By early summer of 1951, the front line had generally stabilized across the middle of the peninsula. Although two years of often bloody fighting continued while the two sides negotiated, a military armistice was concluded on 27 July 1953, separating the two military forces through the establishment of the DMZ roughly following the line of contact between the two opposing forces at the time.

After conclusion of the armistice, the KPA began rebuilding its military capabilities, which had seriously weakened during the war. Economic reconstruction was the most pressing task of the regime, and the military buildup initially took a lower priority; however, the KPA underwent an intensive program to improve professionalism among its officers, implement a higher training standard, and attain and maintain greater battlefield capability. By mid-1958, the KPA had reached a level of combat readiness that permitted the complete withdrawal of all Chinese forces remaining in North Korea after the cessation of the war. By 1960, KPA ground forces consisted of approximately 430,000 personnel in 18 infantry divisions and five brigades.³⁷

North Korea's national strategy for reunification underwent significant expansion and refinement beginning in 1960. Having failed to reunify the peninsula by purely military action, Kim Il Sung recognized the need to combine political and diplomatic efforts with an offensive military strategy. He articulated this approach in his "Three Fronts" strategy, which called for revolutions within North Korea, South Korea, and internationally.³⁸ In December 1962, the Fifth Plenum of the Korean Workers Party Central Committee adopted a three-phase plan to employ both conventional and unconventional means to affect reunification: (1) create a military-industrial base in North Korea, (2) neutralize the

United States by subverting and destroying the US-South Korea alliance, and (3) liberate South Korea through employment of insurgency and conventional force.³⁹ To implement the first phase, the leaders established four basic policies: arming the entire population to prepare for protracted warfare, increasing the sophistication of military training, converting the entire country to a “fortress,” and modernizing the armed forces. The second phase, which began in October 1966, consisted of small-scale attacks against US and South Korean forces deployed along the DMZ to break US national will. The third phase, based on Mao’s People’s War and the experience of the Vietnamese communist insurgency, began in early 1968 and involved infiltration of SOF into South Korea to organize a socialist revolution among the populace. According to the plan, success in the third phase would set the stage for a conventional military offensive to reunify Korea under Pyongyang’s leadership.⁴⁰

Despite a period of increased tension, violent clashes, and much bloodshed during 1966-1969, the North Korean military strategy ultimately failed to achieve its goals of breaking the US-South Korean alliance or creating an armed revolution in South Korea. However, Pyongyang’s strategic objective of reunification remained unchanged, and by the 1970s North Korean leaders modified their military strategy to adopt a more conventional approach. This change was probably driven not only by the failure of its 1960s policy, but also by the belief that the United States was withdrawing its ground forces from Asia. This belief was based on the announcement of the Nixon Doctrine in 1969, which called for a draw-down of US forces in Asia, the withdrawal of the US 7th Infantry Division from South Korea in 1971, and, later, the fall of South Vietnam and President Carter’s plan to withdraw US ground forces from South Korea.

In the early 1970s, following the lead of Soviet military leaders and theorists who were rediscovering and beginning to apply the 1920s-1930s thinking of Soviet military theorists Svechin, Tukhachevskii, Triandafillov, and others on operational art and “deep operations,” the Soviet-trained officers of the KPA were developing their version, termed “Two Front War.” As they envisioned it, a very large conventional force, greatly reinforced with artillery, armor, and mechanized forces, employing surprise, speed, and shock, would break through the DMZ, envelop and destroy South Korean forward forces, and rapidly overrun the entire peninsula. This operation would be supported by a second front composed of SOF infiltrated deep into the South Korean strategic rear to destroy, neutralize, or disrupt South Korean and US air operations; command, control, and communications; and lines of communications.⁴¹ Throughout the 1970s, in the first of a two-phased force expansion plan, North Korea emphasized the commitment of scarce resources, development of industry, and military expansion and reorganization necessary to create such a force.⁴²

During the 1970s, senior KPA officers writing in official journals echoed Soviet military thinking as they characterized the nature of modern warfare as three dimensional, with no distinction between front and rear, highly mobile,

***“North Korea’s military strategy remains
an offensive strategy designed to
achieve reunification by force.”***

and increasingly dependent upon mechanization, task organization, and improved engineer capabilities.⁴³ These articles presaged dramatic increases in mechanized and truck-mobile infantry and self-propelled artillery battalions and ultimately a major expansion, reorganization, and redeployment forward of KPA ground forces.

Beginning in the early 1980s, North Korea began execution of phase two of its force expansion plan by reorganizing its ground forces to form four mechanized corps of five mechanized infantry brigades, an armor corps, and an artillery corps. Most of the mechanized brigades were created from motorized infantry divisions in the forward corps. Two of the four mechanized corps, the armor corps, and the artillery corps were deployed in the forward area along avenues southward just behind the infantry corps located along the northern boundary of the DMZ. By the mid-1980s, the KPA had activated a second artillery corps comprising long-range artillery assets. Additionally, it had reconstituted those forward divisions from which the mechanized forces had been formed.⁴⁴ The ground forces had increased from 720,000 in 1980 to 950,000 by 1994. Forward-deployed forces (those within 100km, or about 60 miles, of the DMZ) had increased from 40 percent to 70 percent of total troop strength.⁴⁵

The end of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union had a traumatic impact on Pyongyang. North Korea suddenly found itself not only without significant ideological allies but also without essential economic and military assistance. In response to this profound predicament, beginning in 1990 North Korea embarked on a comprehensive five-year program to prepare the nation for war without outside assistance.⁴⁶ This war preparation campaign was much broader and more rigorous than any previous effort and had the close attention of Kim Il Sung until his death in 1994. An effort to further improve the capabilities of the KPA was an important element of this campaign. This improvement included reorganization, redeployment, and reinforcement, as well as quantitative and qualitative increases in training at all echelons. Despite serious resource shortfalls and a declining economy, these efforts continue to the present.

Soviet military art has probably continued to be the dominant influence on KPA strategy, operational art, and tactics. In 1978, Kim Il Sung directed that “Military Foundation Day” be changed from 8 February to 25 April—the nomi-

nal day of establishment of his anti-Japanese guerrilla army in 1932—to glorify the supposed indigenous Korean origins of the KPA and obscure its Soviet origin. However, the KPA almost certainly remains a Soviet clone, despite North Korean media statements to the contrary. Since at least late 1998, and possibly earlier, the KPA has been in the process of increasing and concentrating tactical and operational combat power well forward.⁴⁷ This approach closely mirrors Soviet theoretic and practical reaction to threats to their operational and strategic depth posed by the US Army's AirLand Battle doctrine and NATO Follow-On-Forces Attack strategy of the 1980s.⁴⁸ Lessons learned from studying the 1991 Gulf War, US operations in Kosovo, and current operations in Afghanistan have probably inspired further KPA efforts in this direction.⁴⁹

Initiation of a campaign to reunify Korea by force is a political decision that may never be made. However, the KPA has had decades to develop a campaign plan with a small number of military objectives that is probably extensively scripted and war-gamed and would require limited flexibility and modification. KPA forces are deployed optimally to launch an attack. The absolute need for surprise dictates that an attack must be made when tensions on the peninsula are low and preferably when the United States is engaged elsewhere—e.g., in Iraq—when US forces in Northeast Asia are deployed out-of-area and when US stockpiles of high-technology munitions are low. Although the possibility of a North Korean victory seems counterintuitive, at least to outside observers, Pyongyang's continued focus on maintaining and improving its offensive military capability at great cost indicates that the leadership believes it is still possible.

Conclusion

The ideological underpinnings and strategic culture of North Korea's regime emphasize the dominance of militarism epitomized by a strong army. Reunification of the peninsula on North Korean terms remains the foremost strategic goal of the regime. North Korea's severe and probably irreversible economic decline over the past decade places the regime's survival in question. Therefore, North Korean leaders must see reunification on their terms not only as their historic purpose but also as essential to long-term survival. Continued investment in a powerful military organized and deployed to execute an offensive military strategy, despite its drain on a moribund economy, strongly suggests that North Korean leaders perceive its military as probably the only remaining instrument for realization of that goal. At the same time, they must realize that time is not on their side.

In his book, *The Origins of Major War*, Dale Copeland sets forth a strong argument that a state facing irreversible economic decline but still possessing military power vis-à-vis a competing state may resort to preventive war, especially if it perceives its own decline as deep and inevitable.⁵⁰ One might counter by arguing that Pyongyang must know that it lacks any military superiority over the United States, which guarantees the defense of South Korea through the security treaty. This is no doubt true, as evidenced by the effective deterrence of a US military

presence in South Korea for the past five decades. However, it is not so certain that Kim Jong Il judges South Korean military forces alone as superior to the KPA. North Korea's continued insistence that the question of reunification can be settled only among Koreans, and that the withdrawal of all foreign forces is essential to that process,⁵¹ suggests that Pyongyang would prefer to deal militarily with the South Korean army alone.

North Korea's military strategy remains an offensive strategy designed to achieve reunification by force. While the KPA has deployed forces to protect its coasts, airfields, and especially the North Korean capital of Pyongyang, the overall forward deployment of forces and, particularly, forward deployment of large numbers of long-range artillery underscore the offensive nature of its strategy.

Renunciation of reunification as its premier goal, shifting to a defensive military strategy, or dismantling of the military force to achieve it would gravely undermine the *raison d'être* of the regime. North Korean leaders see the demise of the Soviet Union as primarily the result of Gorbachev's "New Thinking," which included the shift of the Soviet Union's military strategy to "defensive defense." Therefore, regime survival depends on staying the course. Simply stated, Pyongyang cannot abandon its offensive military strategy.

NOTES

1. Peter J. Katzenstein, "Introduction: Alternative Perspectives on National Security," in *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1996), p. 6. The author describes culture "as a broad label that denotes collective models of nation-state authority or identity carried by custom or law. Culture refers to both a set of evaluative standards (such as norms and values) and a set of cognitive standards (such as rules and models) that define what social actors exist in a system, how they operate, and how they relate to one another."

2. *Socialist Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea* (Pyongyang: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1998), p. 2. The current North Korean constitution was adopted in 1972; it was revised in 1992 and again in 1998. The paramount importance of reunification is a central theme in this constitution as well as the first North Korean constitution adopted at the founding of the regime in 1948. The preamble to the charter of the [North] Korean Workers' Party declares that "the present task of the Party is to ensure the complete victory of socialism in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the accomplishment of the revolutionary goals of national liberation and the people's democracy in the entire area of the country."

3. National Intelligence Council Conference Report, *North Korea's Engagement—Perspectives, Outlook, and Implications*, 23 February 2001.

4. Victor D. Cha, "North Korea's Weapons of Mass Destruction: Badges, Swords, or Shields?" *Political Science Quarterly*, 117 (No. 2, 2002), 215.

5. This has been a continuous theme of North Korean media since the mid-1950s. For a recent example, see Kim Chong-sun, "Military-First is Road to Victory of Anti-Imperialist, Independent Cause," *Nodong Sinmun* (Labor Newspaper), 19 June 2002, p. 6.

6. Prominent adherents of this view are Bruce Cumings and Selig S. Harrison. For example, see Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun* (New York: Norton, 1997), p. 461; Cumings, *Parallax Visions: Making Sense of American-East Asian Relations at the End of the Century* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1999), pp. 132-33; Harrison, "The Missiles of North Korea," *World Policy Journal*, 17 (Fall 2000), 13-24.

7. Kim Jong Il is the current head of state and national leader of North Korea. He is the son of and successor to Kim Il Sung, the founder of the regime, who died in July 1994.

8. North Korea invests 25 to 33 percent of GNP annually in its military. General Thomas A. Schwartz, Commander, UNC/CFC/USFK, testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 7 March 2000, 27 March 2001, and 5 March 2002.

9. Peter Slevin and Karen DeYoung, "N. Korea Reveals Nuclear Program," *The Washington Post*, 17 October 2002, p. A1.

10. *Socialist Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic*, p. 2. See also the "Study Material" for North Korean military personnel entitled "On Eliminating Illusions about the Enemy and Sharpening the Bayonets of Class" published by the Publication House of the Korean People's Army and reprinted in *Wolgan Choson* (Monthly Korea), 1 March 2002, pp. 72-81, hereinafter "Study Material."

11. The high-ranking North Korean defector Hwang Jang Yop, described as the chief political ideologue and principle regime authority of *Juche*, reportedly told Selig Harrison, in an interview in Pyongyang prior to Hwang's defection, that a communist revolution in South Korea was "completely out of the question." Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1998), p. 401.

12. "Study Material." In this, Kim Jong Il is quoted as stating, "My view of reunification is armed reunification in nature." This point is further explained: "The history of the past half a century demonstrates that as long as US imperialists and southern Korean puppets remain in our country, the fatherland's reunification is absolutely impossible. For the fatherland's reunification, there exists only one method: force of arms."

13. Nicholas Eberstadt, *The End of North Korea* (Washington: AEI Press, 1999), ch. 2, pp. 25-44. Recent statements in the North Korean media have prompted some to speculate that Pyongyang may be initiating steps to deal with chronic shortages; however, it is premature to conclude that North Korea is moving toward adoption of a market-oriented economy. See "North Korea Ending Rationing, Diplomats Report," *The New York Times*, 20 July 2002; "Stitch by Stitch to a Different World," *Economist*, 27 July - 2 August 2002.

14. *Juche*, also transliterated as *Chuche*, is Kim Il Sung's application of Marxism-Leninism to North Korean culture and serves as a fundamental tenet of the national ideology. "Based on autonomy and self-reliance, *chuch'e* has been popularized since 1955 as an official guideline for independence in politics, economics, national defense and foreign policy." Mattes Savada, ed., *North Korea: A Country Study* (Washington: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1994), p. 324.

15. Stephen Bradner, "North Korea's Strategy," in *Planning for a Peaceful Korea*, ed. Henry D. Sokolski (Carlisle, Pa.: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, February 2001), p. 48.

16. Ibid. Bradner's "North Korea's Strategy," provides the most enlightening and comprehensive explanation of North Korea's national strategy of which I am aware.

17. South Korea, despite setbacks experienced during the Asian financial crisis of 1997-99, has continued to achieve an incredible record of growth. North Korea, by contrast, faces desperate economic conditions with little hope of relief or growth under the Kim regime. See data in CIA, *The World Factbook*, <http://cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos.html>. Cha, "North Korea's Weapons of Mass Destruction," describes an almost 20-fold gap in the GDPs of the two economies, p. 215.

18. Donald S. MacDonald, "The Role of the Major Powers in the Reunification of Korea," *The Washington Quarterly*, 15 (Summer 1992), 135-53.

19. Adrian Buzo, *The Guerrilla Dynasty: Politics and Leadership in North Korea* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), p. 1.

20. Ibid., p. 239.

21. Bradner, p. 24.

22. Buzo, p. 27.

23. Although the term, "military-first politics" was first pronounced officially in 1998, it is described as "not the product of recent days. The overall political history of our socialism . . . can be called the history of military-first leadership." "In order to culminate the socialist cause in the long-term confrontation with imperialism, we must naturally give importance to the military. The military-first political style . . . forges ahead with the overall socialist cause by putting forward the military as the pillar for revolution." *Nodong Sinmun* (Labor Newspaper) and *Kulloja* (Worker) joint special article, "The Military-First Politics of our Party is Invincible," June 1999. *Nodong Sinmun* and *Kulloja* are both official publications of the North Korean government and, as such, present the regime's interpretation of events and direction of thought for the nation.

24. Schwartz testimony.

25. US Department of Defense, *Country Handbook: North Korea* (Washington: DOD, August 2000).

26. Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., *North Korean Special Forces, Second Edition* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1998), p. 1.

27. DOD, *Country Handbook: North Korea*.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. The US X Corps executed amphibious operations at Inchon on 15 September 1950 and at Wonsan on 25 October 1950.

31. Information derived from an unclassified briefing, Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence J2, US Forces Korea, as cited in Bradner, pp. 34-35.

32. FEBAs are concentric, fortified defensive belts situated across the peninsula as part of the defense of the ROK. Bradner, p. 20.

33. Ibid., p. 35.

34. A constant theme in North Korean military writings is the requirement to take the offensive, even in the defense. A typical example is found in a 15 June 1999 *Nodong Sinmun* article by Ch'e Song-kuk, "Strong Self-Reliant Defense Capability is an Essential Guarantee for the Safeguard of Sovereignty":

Defense for the sake of defense is a passive way of military action. With that sort of response, it is absolutely impossible to bring on a favorable turn in a war situation. If we should cling to it, we are bound to suffer tremendous damage and eventually be defeated. Only when we respond to a preemptive attack with a more powerful counterattack, we can deal the enemy a devastating blow, reverse the situation and win victory. Taking the initiative in military action by combining firm defenses with powerful offensives is the way of combat to throw the aggressors into confusion, force them on the defensive, and win final victory.

35. KPA organization, deployment, and operational and tactical doctrine have historically reflected, and continue to reflect, a strong Soviet influence. See DOD, *Country Handbook: North Korea*. Many senior KPA officers have been trained in Soviet military schools, and Soviet military thinking has been the dominant influence in KPA military school curriculums and doctrinal writings.

36. Roy E. Appleman, *South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu (June-November 1950)*, United States Army in the Korean War series (Washington: GPO, 1986), ch. II.

37. Kiwon Chung, "The North Korean People's Army and the Party," in *North Korea Today*, ed. Robert A. Scalapino (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1963), pp. 105-24.

38. Buzo, p. 60.

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 69. Bermudez and Daniel P. Bolger, *Scenes from an Unfinished War: Low Intensity Conflict in Korea, 1966-1969*, Leavenworth Papers Number 19 (Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: Combat Studies Institute, 1991) provide excellent, detailed overviews of this period.

41. Young Choi, "The North Korean Military Buildup and its Impact on North Korean Military Strategy in the 1980s," *Asian Survey*, 25 (March 1985), 341-42; David Reese, "North Korea: Undermining the Truce," *Conflict Studies*, No. 69 (March 1976), pp. 2-3; Richard D. Stillwell, "Korea: The Implications of Withdrawal," *Asian Affairs* (September-October 1977), pp. 279-89; Joe Wood, "Persuading a President: Jimmy Carter and American Troops in Korea," *Studies in Intelligence*, 40 (No. 4, 1996), 98-100.

42. Choi, p. 342.

43. A typical example is Kim Chol-man, "The Characteristics of Modern Warfare and the Factors of Victory," *Kulloja* (Workers), August 1976, pp. 34-40.

44. Information in this paragraph is taken from Defense Intelligence Agency, *North Korea: The Foundations of Military Strength* (Washington: DIA, 1991).

45. Bradner, p. 34.

46. Defense Intelligence Agency, *North Korea: The Foundations of Military Strength, Update 1995* (rev. ed.; Washington: DIA, March 1996), p. 13.

47. Schwartz testimony.

48. AirLand Battle and Follow-On-Forces Attack were strategies that emphasized applying long-range weapons and precision-guided munitions to attack an enemy's forward forces while striking and destroying reinforcing second- and third-echelon forces before they could reach the battlefield.

49. Schwartz testimony.

50. Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 2000), p. 20, writes:

A state . . . that is superior in military power but *inferior* in economic and potential power is more likely to believe that, once its military power begins to wane, further decline will be inevitable and deep. This is especially so if the trends of relative economic and potential power are downward as well. The state will believe that there is little it can do through arms racing to halt its declining military power: it would simply be spending a greater percentage of an already declining economic base in the attempt to keep up with a rising state that has the resources to outspend it militarily. Moreover, economic restructuring is unlikely to help, since the potential power that is the foundation of economic power is also inferior and declining. Under these circumstances, a dominant military power is likely to be pessimistic about the future and more inclined to initiate major war as a "now-or-never" attempt to shore up its waning security.

51. Although Republic of Korea President Kim Dae-jung has said that, during private meetings in Pyongyang during the June 2000 ROK-North Korean Summit, North Korean leader Kim Jong Il agreed that the continued presence of US military forces in Korea was needed for regional stability (see, for example, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, 3 March 2002, translation of interview with former ROK Unification Minister Kang In-tok in Seoul Wolgan Choson in Korean), North Korean officials have continued to call for complete withdrawal of US forces. For a typical example, see Pong Sun-Hwa, "Realization of National Independence Idea Is Fatherland's Reunification," *Nodong Sinmun* (Labor Newspaper), 8 June 2002.